

A PALPABLE SECTARIAN STRIFE Politics and the Sword in Syria

BY MICHAEL TANNENBAUM



HAFEZ ASSAD

THE SECURITY SERVICE in this country—where leaders of the Arab “Front for Steadfastness and Confrontation” (Algeria, Libya, the Palestine Liberation Organization, South Yemen, and Syria) met last month to plan a strategy for undermining the Camp David “framework”

agreements between Egypt and Israel—operates no less than five distinct branches. They watch the public, the Armed Forces, and one another. The Range Rover vehicles they alone use can be seen churning up dust all over this capital’s tree-lined boulevards, advertising their ubiquitousness.

Theoretically, Syria is run by the Socialist Baath party, suggesting communal leadership. In reality, it is increasingly ruled by one man, President Hafez Assad. He not only exploits the Baathist structure—its trade and student unions, women’s organizations—to strengthen his personal hold, but more important, he has turned the security service and the military into instruments of personal power by blanketing each with a network of fellow Alawi Moslems. Indeed, Assad’s is an Alawi regime, a fact that sheds a great deal of light on Syria’s internal political situation as well as on some of its foreign policy initiatives.

For centuries the Alawis, who today comprise about 11 per cent of the population, lived impacted in the mountains of Latakia as a defense against persecution by the Sunni Moslem majority. To escape from the poverty, in

more recent times many of them entered the Army. There they found that the military had launched itself into the political arena; and that increasingly politicians were looking to the military as the only constituency worth courting.

In this atmosphere the Alawis were drawn to the Baath Party for two reasons: the values of social justice it espoused and the stress it placed on a non-sectarian identity—an Arab identity—as an umbrella for the country’s varied religious groupings. The nonsectarian approach was especially appealing, a Beirut sociologist explained, for it allowed a man from the minorities to confront a Sunni Moslem as an equal. Eventually Baathist military men came to power, and a few years later, a “corrective” coup within the party brought the Alawi contingent to the fore.

Assad, who has given this country the longest lasting, most stable government it has known, works hard at retaining power. He personally evaluates every military transfer and promotion

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from the rank of major up, enabling him to stock the upper ranks of the Armed Forces with friendly faces.

An extreme case in point is the special forces unit headed by the President's younger brother, Rifat Assad. It guards the regime's nerve center from Damascus' southwest periphery, has a particularly high percentage of Alawis and is armed with the newest, best weapons.

Within this elite, Rifat is a special force in his own right, busting up fledgling coalitions in the Army's officer cadres. Not surprisingly, his popularity among those he oversees is low.

The public does not find him attractive either, for Rifat is a man of excess. The rumors of his sexual activities, for example, do not go over well in a country where many of the women still wear the veil. And people want to know where a soldier, even a high-ranking one, gets the money for a palatial country estate or the coffee-colored Ferrari I saw outside his well-guarded office near the Hotel Meridien. (The most likely source, according to Western diplomats, is illegally acquired property, and certainly the opportunities for aggrandizement exist.)

"We'd like nothing better than to get rid of him," an official confided. That Hafez Assad hasn't done so attests, observers say, to the depth of the President's affection for his younger brother. ("Hafez gets all dewy-eyed whenever Rifat enters a room," reports one man.) It also testifies to the illusory or actual security that Rifat affords—a security Hafez cannot do without.

During the past year-and-a-half, more than a dozen Alawis of secondary prominence have been cut down by assassination—a reasonably clear indication that an organized effort is under way to thicken an already palpable sectarian strife. Motorcycles, driven by some of the assassins, have been restricted in use. According to a Syrian official, too, a high-level member of the regime with internal security responsibilities, Naji Jamil, was recently demoted for failure to make progress in uprooting the assailants. (Western sources add that Jamil was in long-

standing rivalry with Rifat Assad—a singularly unhealthy state.)

Speculation about the identity of the assassins ranges from Iraqis to Palestinians to dissident Alawis (the man Assad deposed in 1970 came from one of Latakia's two major Alawi tribes; Assad hails from a smaller tribe and the manner of his ascension produced bad blood within the community) to devout Sunnis, who have long censured the Baath as atheistic. The more politically zealous among the last group—at present not of significant number—enlist in movements like the Youth of Mohammed, whose leader, Marwan Hadid, died last summer in prison, apparently as a result of a hunger strike. The security service is said to be having trouble penetrating the organization, whose supporters have pledged revenge.

THE PRESENCE of assassins does not necessarily reflect a regime's general popularity, of course, and in the case of Syria there are few ways of taking an accurate reading. Elections here are scarcely worthy of the name, the media provide no outlets for public expression and citizens wisely refrain from candid conversation with those not in their circle. Nevertheless, after speaking at length with foreign and local residents, a number of educated tentative conclusions about the present situation seem justified.

For example, the religious minorities (some 30-40 per cent of the population) feel generally secure under Assad, recognizing in him a man of similar background. In addition, since a sizeable segment of them still lives in rural areas, they have been beneficiaries of the revolution that has swept Syria. Land reform and the extension of electricity lines have resulted in the remotest villages experiencing increases in income and in the standard of living.

The Sunni Moslem majority for the most part dislikes the regime. Economic policy, though, has had an attenuating effect. Socialism's sharper edges have been blunted and a broader private sector has been mapped off as a

gesture toward the predominantly Sunni middle and upper classes. They are currently prospering, for although the country's heady annual growth rate of 10-12 per cent a few years ago has declined considerably, it continues at a respectable 4-5 per cent. Consequently, except for the zealots, acquiescence to Assad's rule seems to be the Sunni watchword.

It would appear, therefore, that the government has no serious challengers. Yet at least one veteran Mideast hand here expresses skepticism: "Sure the regime looks healthy. That's precisely what our Afghani embassy was reporting just two days before the recent coup."

Such doubts are supported by the country's history. For the very notion of loyalty to Syria, not to mention a Syrian government, is a relatively new one. On the eve of independence in 1946, historian Albert Hourani observed that little sense of "Syrianism" was evident because "Syria" had been a term encompassing roughly Lebanon, Israel, Jordan, and the present truncated country. This is one important reason why officials in Damascus traditionally tended to place the Palestinian cause above that of Syrian well-being. But 30 years later, in June 1976, when its tanks rumbled into civil war riven Lebanon—sights set on the Palestinians and their compadres—the Syrian Arab Republic seemed to come of age. With Lebanon on the verge of Palestinianization—hence a problem to Syria's security and prosperity—Hafez Assad made plain whose interests came first.

The public's initial reaction was one of stunned disbelief. In some sectors of the Armed Forces protests were mounted against the incursion, and shakeups ensued. Yet since then the depth of support for the Palestinians has become a question mark. At least that is the impression a reporter comes away with as he tries to measure present sentiment with the admittedly limited tools available to him here. Consider the following:

• A Sunni university student from Aleppo: "No, I don't want to serve in

the Army. How can you believe in it? Take the Palestinians. They're the first to run when the fighting starts."

- A Sunni fisherman from Tartous, now with Rifat Assad's special forces: "I do three years in the Army. The Palestinian does two. Why should I do his fighting for him?"

- A Greek Orthodox university student from Latakia: "No one cares about the Palestinians anymore." Then how do you justify going to the Army, I asked. "The government forces you."

- A West Bank Palestinian on a visit from Hebron: "What my Syrian friends want is the Golan. They're finished with the Palestinians."

shares their sentiments. Thus one man I spoke to dismissed the idea of support for the Palestinians truly undergoing erosion, claiming that it was merely a surface phenomena: "The people are behind them. It's just that with the lack of apartments, and taxes doubling prices on cars, and long lines for bread—all because the government spends most of the budget on arms mainly for the Palestinian struggle—there is a tendency to blame the Palestinians."

HIS ASSESSMENT cannot be easily dismissed, disturbing as it is to any neat analysis. For it points to the conflicting emotional



- A Greek Orthodox newly recruited to the Army: "Why do we fight? Sometimes I ask myself. Believe me, I don't know. Ask him [he points to a portrait of President Assad]. Even he doesn't know. Maybe he prefers all Syrian young men to die. No, really, I don't know."

- A prominent journalist in Damascus: "Correct, we attacked the Palestinians. But look at it another way. They shot back. Dead Syrians were being shipped home. Some people weren't too pleased about that."

Although the responses noted are representative of the overwhelming majority I elicited, a caveat is necessary. Not everyone by any means

pulls that make it difficult to predict the future course of events in Syria. The Palestinian cause has long ridden the crest of the most deep-seated and compelling force of modern Arab political culture: Pan-Arabism (or Arab Nationalism). This ideology contends that unifying the Arabs into a single expansive nation would not only remedy their atrophied condition but expedite their return to world prominence. And, most significantly, the social force that fuels this pan-Arab fire is a Sunni Moslem one.

The great Arab dynasties were Sunni Moslem dynasties, as was the Turkish Ottoman Empire, overlord to the Arabs for some 400 years, until World

War I. At the end of that War, the Turks were vanquished and the victorious Western powers broke up the empire, laying down borders that have been the bane of pan-Arabists. The eminent Lebanese historian, Kamel Salibi, placed the effects of these developments in perspective for me during a recent interview at his seaside office at the American University of Beirut:

"When the Ottoman Empire was disbanded, the Sunni Moslem was cast into confusion. Translated politically, that confusion is the chaos we've experienced in the Middle East ever since.

"The Sunni suffers a lack. His universal Moslem state was divided and unable to adapt to a nation-state framework: he longs for its recovery. That, in a word, is the motive underlying pan-Arabism, though most of its proponents are unconscious of this.

"The Sunni's internal conflict is not to be slighted. If he gives his loyalty to the nation-state, he feels he is betraying the higher ideal of breaking down its border. The religious minorities in the Arab world are not subject to this conflict. Under Ottoman rule they lived in nearly autonomous communities, their loyalties hence always more regional or communal.

"In the light of this, what we've witnessed in Syria is no surprise. The country under Sunni rule [1946-1963] was in unremitting turmoil. One coup followed the next. The leadership kept trying to sell off Syria to other Arab states with the aim of unifying. These Sunni leaders had little interest in Syria. Its existence, in fact, was an embarrassment: a constant reproach that unity hadn't been achieved. When the minorities came to power [i.e., the Alawis] it was a different story. They emphasized Syrian interests. The country is consequently better run now."

The underlying tensions between Sunni and Alawi still exists in today's Syria. They explain why, when Assad entered Lebanon, he dispatched his brother's forces to areas of high Sunni concentration. They also explain why Assad's regime would be in deep trouble without the Army and security service—despite its veneer of strength.